DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 093 160 FL 005 461

AUTHOR Grobsmith, Elizabeth S.
TITLE Nonverbal Modes of Learning: Dakota Sign Language and Gesture Communication.
PUB DATE 73
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association (72nd, New Orleans, Louisiana, November 28-December 2, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS American Indian Languages; Classroom Communication; Literacy; *Nonverbal Communication; *Nonverbal Learning; *Paralinguistics; Response Mode; *Sign Language; Sociolinguistics
IDENTIFIERS *Lakota

ABSTRACT

Sociolinguistic data regarding code selection and nonverbal modes of learning are examined in the gesture communication system of the (Oglala and Brule) Sioux. Sign language is viewed as an extra-linguistic mode of communication currently in use in Indian classrooms. It is one alternative to literacy as a means of communication; however, this is not to suggest that sign language be adopted in place of literacy for formal education. Analysis of contextual uses of sign language suggests that some nonverbal learning may enhance classroom participation and, in some situations, have more cultural salience than literacy. Sign language represents an example of a code which may be selected from the communicative repertoire of the community. Since sign language usage depends on an internalization of the verbal categories, the internal structure and syntax is maintained despite the transferral to nonverbal grammar. Furthermore, its use is nonrandom; it is definitely patterned and subject to social constraints and sociolinguistic pressures. (Author/LG)

NONVERBAL MODES OF LEARNING:

DAKOTA SIGN LANGUAGE AND GESTURE COMMUNICATION

Elizabeth S. Grobsmith [redacted]

Department of Anthropology

University of Arizona

Tucson, Arizona

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

...SSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Elizabeth S Grobsmith

...AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER.

Prepared for presentation at 72nd Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, New Orleans, Nov. 28-Dec. 2, 197

Preliminary Draft: PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE WITHOUT PERMISSION

Abstract

Sociolinguistic data regarding code selection and nonverbal modes of learning are examined in the gesture communication system of the (Oglala and Brule) Sioux. Sign language, a paralinguistic system governed by grammatical and situational rules, is viewed as an extra-linguistic mode of communication currently in use in Indian classrooms. Analysis of contextual uses of sign language suggests that some nonverbal learning may enhance classroom participation and, in some situations, have more cultural salience than literacy. Situations generating gesture responses are presented.

During the last several years, an increasing amount of literature has appeared regarding the sociology of language, a great deal of which calls attention to phonological variation, alternate code selection within a speech community, and language interference, particularly among school children. This paper will present another example of alternatives to literacy as a means of communication, particularly where such alternatives have demonstrable salience to speech communities. Data for this study was collected in Northwest Nebraska and on the Pine Ridge Reservation during the summers of 1971 and 1972, and on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota during the past summer. The primary focus here is to present data regarding uses of sign language, a paralinguistic system of gesture communication, and cite its validity and utility in certain patterned situations. It is not the intention of the writer to suggest that this system be adopted in place of literacy for formal education, nor do I wish to imply that in all situations sign language is pragmatically useful or even appropriate; certainly it is not. Sign language, used contextually, can be understood as a method of communication governed by grammatical and situational rules and subject to decision-making processes regarding selection. Furthermore, it has persisted in times of acculturation and has become adapted to contemporary situations. Prior to my discussion of this mode of communication and its potential as a resource on the reservations, it is necessary to briefly review the data on sign language and mention the situations generating such paralinguistic

responses. This information, collected by Bruce La Brack and myself, has previously been presented at the 1971 meetings of the Plains Anthropological Association. A situational analysis was done revealing conditions generating uses of sign language and demonstrating the persistence of a traditional medium of communication in the Plains area in present geographic, economic, and cultural environments. This paper, then, is an extension of our sign language data; the following synopsis will acquaint you with some of the signs used and the social settings in which they occur.

Our first category, entitled "signs replacing oral expression" represents situations where there was no verbal communication accompanying the gestures. Situations included in this category were: prevention of auditory communication in close proximity due to noise level--an example of this would be the noise of machinery equipment interfering with conversation, or a high noise level at a large public gathering such as a pow-wow. Also included under this category would be the prevention of auditory communication by physical or geographic separation rather than by noise--an example of this would be the use of sign language while hunting and the necessity for maintaining silence in the stalking of game. Other activities cited as enhanced by silence were those involving personal danger, such as confrontations with police or instances in which a threatening environment necessitated the use of signs by Indians to deliberately exclude non-Indians.

This situation was of particular interest to us, as some evidence indicated that the connotation of the "silent classroom" was not completely accurate (Wax 1964). Rather than being silent and passive, the classroom can be a theatre of communication and expression, the medium being a system of signs and body movements unknown to the non-Indian teachers. In this case, verbal silence may not be the equivalent of non-communication.

The last example of "signs replacing oral expression" are those of non-linguistic commentary. They refer to the execution of signs expressing approval or disapproval (make signs for 'I agree','I disagree'). This can also be used to ensure the exclusion of non-Indians in a discussion.

The second supra-category comprises the use of signs to accompany rather than replace oral expression. Sign language may be used in public, such as during meetings or group gatherings, both to amplify and further define verbal instructions. Examples of such uses would be (make signs) 'I agree and would like to speak', 'I disagree and would like to say something' or a demand for silence (stop). Privately and informally, sign language may be used to accompany storytelling as part of an oral tradition. Watching an elderly Sioux gentleman relate a myth or historical legend is as much a lesson in gesture communication as it is in a verbal relating of the events. Within this same supra category fall the more sacred situations generating paralinguistic responses. At Sun Dances, during yuwipi meetings, skin sacrifices and other rituals, a holy man will

often use gestures to indicate instruction to candidates or guests, either to hasten or amplify verbal orders. Most often gestures are used for emphasis, much the way individuals may revert to their native language when emotionally excited (Gumperz 1969). Prayer is also accompanied by signs, for silence is periodically required to summon spirits. During the performance of the Sun Dance, the head dancer will often use prayer gesture to ask supernatural guidance in doing flesh piercing and in helping candidates endure skin sacrifices.

It can be seen, then, that there are a great many situations in which sign language is used, often preferred, and sometimes required. This system consists of definitely patterned situations which generate the use of particular gestures according to the activity or event transpiring. Or, as Gumperz has so clearly put it,

> Social restraints on language choice are an important component of the relationship between signs and their meaning...it is the individual who makes the decision, but his freedom to select is always subject both to grammatical rules and social restraints (Gumperz 1964:138).

As a non-random communication alternative, it merits examination as a culturally salient code, chosen from a communication repertoire and representing an information-transaction medium still in use.

Paralinguistics, then, is not to be regarded as the sole medium of communication within a community, but as an alternative in the verbal and non-verbal repertoire à la Gumperz, a selection made from the total choices available to the speech community. One who knows sign language can switch from Lakota to sign language

much the same way a monolingual English speaker can shift styles or codes or the way a speaker of Black English shifts from a non-standard variety of English to Standard English. In keeping with Hymes' concept of "communicative competence" (1971), sign language represents yet another style of communication available to the members of a speech community and patterned by certain socio-linguistic events.

An increasing number of studies have recently affirmed that literacy is indeed not the only or the most salient means of communication and education. In Susan Philips' study of learning on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation in Oregon, it is suggested that the school is attempting to move people from a completely non-literate or oral tradition to that of a literate tradition. Here, she regards literacy as only one of the many modes of communication comprising the communicative repertoire of the community (Philips, n.d.:5). Her suggestion that it would be useful to consider what the communicative needs of a community are and discover how these needs might best be met certainly applies to the Dakota living on the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Reservations. Another study by Rohner on the Kwakiutl of British Columbia (1970) cites further evidence that literacy is not necessarily the most appropriate medium of instruction. He finds that children learn mainly by manipulation and experimentation rather than by literate means, especially when knowledge for skills such as being a fisherman are not gained primarily through verbal or written instruction.

Cultural attitudes toward communication play a strong role in the selection of usable codes. Silence, as a virtue rather than an implication of guilt, has been cited as the focus of

classroom misunderstanding for the last decade. A Sioux attitude toward silence is reflected in the Lakota word for it: wiúkċa, meaning 'the stopping of speech'. Its equivalent is "thinking" and it carries no stigma. An accusation of wo'u^{n}spe ṡni in Lakota means there is no knowlege, whereas the translation in English carries a heavier accusation: 'he doesn't know anything'. The message, not so offensive when spoken in Lakota, is stigmatized and interpreted as criticism to a Lakota-speaking child. Silence is also associated with dignity, bravery and modesty, values still strongly respected by Dakota; gregariousness is concurrently regarded as conceit and pushiness and typical of waṡiċus, 'white men'. This is strongly evident in Sioux introductions, or rather the lack thereof. A non-Indian visiting an Indian's home will find that he is expected to honk his horn and wait outside for a response, and barking dogs ensure the visitor that this is the safest alternative. When there is a response, no introduction is made; although visiting whites will identify themselves, Indians will not state their names or ask anyone else's; suspicious people or activities are met with few words. Verbal activity does not always carry the same value it does in our society. Martha Ward cites the lack of value on being verbal among Black children in the community of Vacherie near New Orleans--in fact, being quiet is regarded as virtuous, being noisy as interfering and troublesome (Ward 1971). Cultural attitudes toward verbosity, then, are certain to influence classroom learning, and student performance will be subject to such social constraints. When modes of communication other than

speech are situationally employed, it is important that their contexts be isolated so that the code can be considered as an alternative choice in the educational milieu. Philips goes so far as to suggest that

> schools may attempt to modify teaching methods in such a way as to more closely approximate the modes of communication with which students are already familiar in their community (Philips n.d.:2a).

Recent work in the field of Black English, pioneered by William Labov (1969) and being continued by Mitchell-Kernan (1971) and others has testified to the fact that there is no verbal defecit in black children; rather a different grammatical sequence with phonological variation characterizes non-standard speech, used alternately with standard English by some individuals. Burling (1971), who advises linguists to take great precaution in working with teachers of children who come from a speech community different from their own, points out the necessity of educating teachers in these sensitive areas, so as to maximize their children's performance rather than defeat them with accusations of "bad English" or "bad upbringing". Interestingly enough, many of my informants still believe in the verbal defecit theory; they will state that their children don't speak proper English and are therefore unskilled in language. Teachers say that even English-speaking Sioux children do not speak English fluently or properly, although they may not know Lakota. All recognize the desirability of children succeeding in scholastic ventures; few recognize the implications of code switching and dialect use for education or the effect that attitudes toward language have on learning.

A brief look at the situation at Rosebud will elucidate specific reasons for my suggestion that literacy may not be the salient mode of learning it is assumed to be, much as the situation is at Warm Springs.

The Rosebud Reservation in Central South Dakota consists of mainly Brule Sioux, some Oglala, and fewer representations of the Hunkpapa and other bands. The land is a mixture of barren sandy hills and rich fertile valleys, cut by streams and small natural lakes. Most of the land is used for cattle grazing and has the appearance of an endless expanse of open plain. One can travel for 30 miles without seeing a sign while passing through communities whose names are not posted. Most of these areas on the reservation retain clusters of kin-related groups, and band affiliations are still important within communities such as Two Strike, Milk's Camp, Upper Cut Meat, Spring Creek and Soldier Creek. None of these villages or communities are labeled yet everyone on the reservation knows where they are. Rarely would an Indian use written directions to go anywhere. The emphasis or value placed on being able to read signs and directions is simply not made because it is superfluous. Landmarks, graves, historic sites all remain unmarked yet are known and visited. Trying to locate a woman this past summer, I was repeatedly told she was "over there". This direction had no special referent to me. As I enumerated all the possibilities of where she might be, I finally struck the right one...she was a few miles ahead on the road to Winner heading East. Ambiguous directions do not mean that one is inarticulate--it means that local people know where "over there" is and lengthy

verbal explications are simply not required.

Whereas an urban child is dependent on his ability to read a subway map in order to wend his way home, a reservation child is pointed in a direction or given a geographic landmark for a reference point; his reliance is not on literate material for getting along. Reading for pleasure and as a leisure activity does not exist for him. Indian families prefer to spend their time on community activities, church affairs, clothing drives, celebration preparation, visiting with relatives and mobilizing resources for their people. Basically, literacy is not a requirement for functioning, and it is difficult to expect that an Indian child will rely on the written word with the religious fervor that exists among the urban middle class.

Lastly, the positive sanctions on being verbal do not exist in most homes; more often, the presence of large numbers of children causes the positive sanctions to rest on non-verbal behavior. As Margaret Mead so clearly points out, a value on literacy may exist which is the reverse of ours and stems from the idea that

> writing is seen as a way in which people can get the better of you, know who you are, relate your past actions to the future, check on whom you married... such concern is constantly expressed as a fear that knowledge of who you are will only be used to do you damage (Mead 1971:71).

On the reservation, when a child attends school, it may often be his first acquaintance with written material. Mead further claims that attitudes toward the "importance of reading have been established for good or ill, long before the child goes to school" (1971:73). For an urban child, reading and writing

represent a cognitive reality, something which has already been introduced as a source of pleasure, retreat and gratification. The reservation child, on the other hand, has learned a language in which he can fully communicate without having learned to write. Therefore, he does not equate literacy with language. What he learns to emulate is the outstanding oral tradition of the men in his community. His first contact with literacy may be in public or mission school. On the Rosebud Reservation, few curriculum materials making use of the Lakota language exist, although St. Francis school is 100% Indian and the Rosebud School is approximately 90% Indian. Lakota has become increasingly used as a written language since the orthography was first developed by missionaries such as Buechel in the first decade of the 1900's; also there has been an increased use of Lakota dictionaries and grammars. The use of Lakota in schools is curtailed, however, by the teachers' failure to learn it and since historically, educational goals have been assimilationist.

Although literacy in English has been maintained as the predominant educational medium of the schools, the Rosebud community is definitely bilingual. Lakota has both a formalized or "high" form and a vernacular form, both of which are maintained as alternate styles. Together, they comprise the language of the home environment of most fullbloods and some mixed bloods, and are used at traditional ceremonies and gatherings. In contrast, English is used in the schools, BIA facilities, in stores, post offices, churches and hospitals. The bilingual mix heard most often on the reservation is a result of Lakota being most

appropriate for some domains of activity while English is for others. The language interference of fluent Lakota speakers consists of Lakota sentences interspersed with English words having inadequate glosses in Lakota such as "loudspeaker", "powwow committee", etc. The fact that bilingualism or more precisely bi-codalism, persists on the reservation is sufficient reason to hope that careful investigations will be made into the nature of functional bilingualism and the maintenance of its linguistic and non-linguistic varieties. As in the case of the uses of sign language, the environments in which certain code selections are made must be isolated so that a clear picture of alternately available modes can be obtained. It is important to interject that caution is required in approaching the domain of communication and education, for uses of English varieties may be acceptable to scholars but unacceptable to potential employers. While we espouse the need to study non-standard varieties of English and defend their use in classrooms, we are far from able to transform society's attitudes toward the employment of individuals speaking non-standard English. Although we explore cultural attitudes toward speech and non-speech, we cannot endorse the exclusive use of relevant and salient modes to the exclusion of standard English instruction, for this would further reduce employability. It would be still further an injustice to NOT teach bilingually, not solely because of the individual's right to maintain his native language which we have long held, but because of his right to have a viable and saleable skill. Commending the use of Black English or Indian English or even

sign language carries the added responsibility of NOT incapacitating students by limiting their alternatives to working in their home regions.

It has been my intention to introduce an alternative paralinguistic gesture communication system, sign language, as a viable, socially patterned communicative code, available to Dakota on and near the two large South Dakota reservations. Sign language represents an example of a code which may be selected from the communicative repertoire of the community. Since sign language usage depends on an internalization of the verbal categories; the internal structure and syntax is maintained despite the transferral to non-verbal grammar. Furthermore, its use is non-random, but definitely patterned and subject to social constraints and sociolinguistic pressures. It has been suggested that this mode of communication, when situationally appropriate, may have more salience than literacy.

References cited

Burling, Robbins
1971 "Talking to Teachers about Social Dialects", Language Learning, Vol. 21 no. 2.

Gumperz, John
1964 "Linguistic and Social Interaction in Two Communities", The Ethnography of Communication, Gumperz and Hymes, eds. AA Special Publication Vol. 66 no. 6 pt. II.

1969 "Cognitive Aspects of Bilingual Communication", Language Behavior Research Laboratory, Berkeley.

1970 "Verbal Strategies in Multilingual Communication", Monograph Series on Language and Linguistics, 21st Annual Round Table No. 23, Georgetown: Georgetown University Press.

Hymes, Dell
1964 "Toward Ethnographies of Communication: the Analysis of Communicative Events", AA Special Publication, Vol. 66 no. 6 pt. II.

1971 "On Linguistic Theory, Communicative Competence, and the Education of Disadvantaged Children", IN: Anthropological Perspectives on Education, ed. by Wax, Diamond and Gearing, New York: Basic Books, Inc.

Labov, William
1969 "The Logic of Nonstandard English" , Georgetown Monographs on Language and Linguistics, Vol. 22 (reprinted in Giglioli, Language and Social Context, Penguin Books, 1972).

La Brack, Bruce
1971 "Talking With Pictures: A Situational Analysis of Siouan Sign Language", Paper delivered at Annual Meeting of the Plains Anthropological Association, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

Mead, Margaret
1971 "Early Childhood Experience and Later Education in Complex Cultures", IN: Anthropological Perspectives on Education, ed. by Wax, Diamond and Gearing, New York: Basic Books, Inc.

Mitchell-Kernan, Claudia
1971 Language Behavior in a Black Urban Community, Language-Behavior Research Laboratory, Monograph No. 2, Berkeley, California.

Philips, Susan
n.d. "Literacy as a Mode of Communication on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation", unpublished paper to appear in Foundations of Language Development, E. & E. Lenneberg, eds.

1970 "Acquisition of Roles for Appropriate Speech Usage", 21st Annual Round Table, Georgetown Monograph Series, Georgetown, (reprinted in Abrahams and Troike, Language and Cultural Diversity in American Education, Englewood-Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972).

Rohner, Ronald and Evelyn
1970 The Kwakiutl: Indians of British Columbia, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York.

Ward, Martha C.
1971 Them Children: A Study in Language Learning, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York.

Wax, Murray
1964 Formal Education in an American Indian Community, Social Problems, supplement, Vol. II, No. 4, spring.